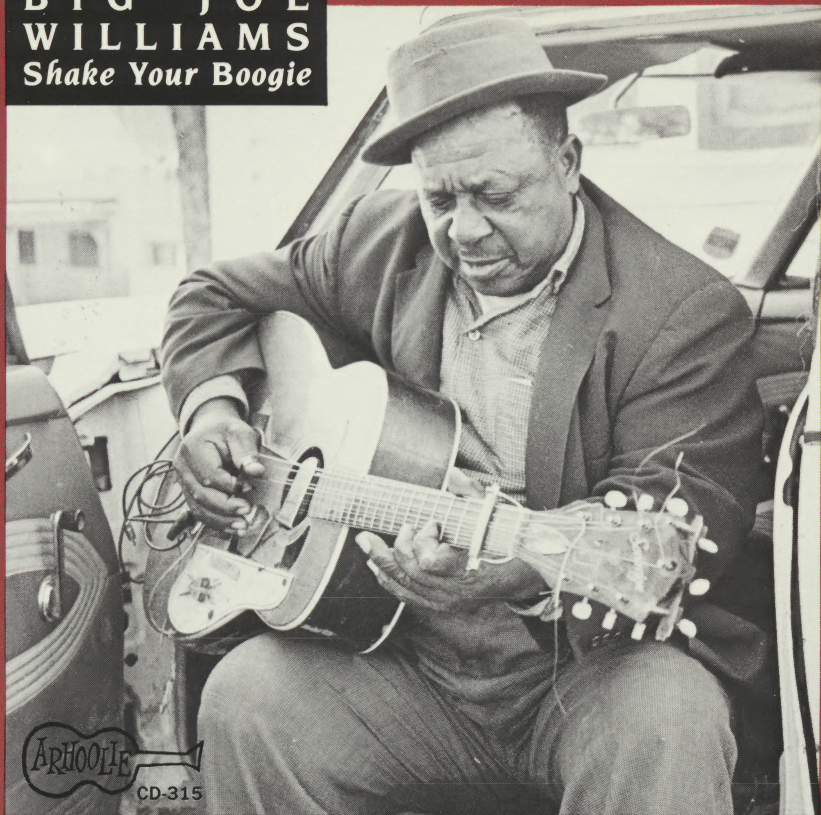


**BIG JOE  
WILLIAMS**  
*Shake Your Boogie*



ARHOLLE  
CD-315

Over 60 Minutes of CLASSIC BLUES

# BIG JOE WILLIAMS

## Shake Your Boogie



CD-315

Over 60 Minutes of Classic **BLUES**

1. Sloppy Drunk Blues
2. Yo Yo Blues
3. President Roosevelt
4. Forty Four Blues
5. Greystone Blues
6. I Want My Crown
7. Mean Step Father
8. Brother James
9. Shake Your Boogie
10. Vitamin A Blues
11. She Left Me A Mule To Ride
12. So Glad
13. Louisiana Bound
14. Killing Floor Blues
15. Throw The Boogie Woogie
16. Dirt Road Blues
17. Montreal Blues
18. Take Me Out Of The Bottom
19. Thinking Of What They Did To Me
20. The Death Of Dr. Martin Luther King (\*)
21. Army Man In Vietnam (\*)
22. Creole Queen
23. Remember Way Back
24. King Jesus (\*)

Total time: 66:40



**J**oe Williams was one of the best and fiercest of the Mississippi Country Blues singers to emerge in the 1930s and became famous for his song "Baby Please Don't Go," which has become a blues standard. "Big Joe," snapping the bass strings of his 9 string guitar, survived with an uncompromising raw style to make an impact on the "folk" music scene of the 1960s and 70s. During that period of world wide interest in authentic American music and Country Blues, Big Joe enjoyed renewed popularity and toured extensively in the US and Europe. This recording is generally considered Big Joe's best and most emotionally charged performance ever captured on tape.

**Big Joe Williams** – vocals and 9 string guitar; **Mary Williams** – vocal on #6; **Charlie Musselwhite** – harmonica on (\*) items. All selections composed by Joe Lee Williams and © by Tradition Music Co. (BMI)

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COMPACT  
**disc**  
DIGITAL AUDIO



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## Big Joe Williams

I met Big Joe Williams through Bob Geddins, one of the Bay Area's legendary "record men," whom I would visit periodically in the late 50s and early 1960s at one of his constantly moving studio locations in Oakland, Calif. One day I'd just stopped by to find out what was happening on the local R & B scene, when Bob pulled out a tape and put it on the old Ampex and said, "Chris, I've got something I want you to hear." I knew who it was with the opening guitar sounds and asked "where did you record Big Joe Williams" figuring he was in Chicago or someplace down in Mississippi. Bob Geddins replied that Big Joe had made that tape for him right here in Oakland and that he'd gotten into some trouble with the law and was sent to Greystone Prison. Bob Geddins had kindly paid Big Joe's bail and I soon was face to face with one of the great blues

singers of all times in a run down hotel on Oakland's San Pablo Avenue. I was a school teacher in Los Gatos at the time and living on the Santa Cruz highway but on week ends I'd be up visiting friends in Berkeley. I made arrangements for Big Joe to get down to Los Gatos during the week and Marcellus Thomas, blues singer from Texas, volunteered to be the driver. I didn't have the money to pay for Bob Geddins' studio and a friend offered to let us use his Ampex and EV 666 mike which was better equipment compared to what I had. I scraped up my savings and paid what little I had to Big Joe who had come out here to California with his wife and child looking for some kind of helping hand. It was for me one of the many lessons I was to learn about the blues.

Tough times and trouble were well-known to Big Joe Williams, he

lived with them all his life. The highways were his home and the streets were his pathways. One week he was in Chicago, in St. Louis the next, then again you might meet him in Jackson, or perhaps out on the Coast hoping to cut some records. The night clubs in the black ghettos didn't offer their bandstands to Joe's type of music but often he found an audience in the small beer joint down the street, where the people knew his music. That music came from the bottoms, from the hot, humid Delta country, from the levee camps, from the southern juke joints, and from the country house parties. This is the life which Big Joe sang about with his rough voice and forceful delivery.

Born in Crawford, Miss., on October 16, 1903, Joe Lee Williams was one of sixteen children and at an early age made his way from the farm to the tougher but less restrictive life around the levee camps, railroads, and lumber mills.

Around 1918 he toured with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. In the 1930s he recorded his hit "Baby Please Don't Go" and worked and recorded with the late Sonny Boy Williamson. After World War II he lived mostly in St. Louis and Chicago but most of his time was spent on the road "hoboing and traveling." Big Joe fixed up many old guitars to his liking and the 9-stringer he plays on these recordings is an example of his talent at rebuilding instruments to give them his unique sound.

Big Joe's songs are a remarkable mixture of traditional, autobiographical, and improvised elements. On the day most of the songs on this CD/C were recorded, Big Joe was under considerable emotional strain. He was worried and upset and the first group of songs, most of them unfortunately spoiled by equipment failure, reflect these anxieties and difficulties which were the result of his arrest in Oakland, CA for ap-

parently pulling a knife during an argument with a woman. This worry gave an emotional intensity to each of the songs recorded. "Greystone Blues" is one of the best. Even though it opens with a standard line about Anna Mae, (my first impulse was to write that name down as the title), the second half tells his feelings about his rather confused situation. The transfer from the Oakland city jail to the "Greystone" security building at the Santa Rita Correctional Facilities in Pleasanton, Calif., must have been a terrible experience for the singer.

"Sloppy Drunk Blues," is a tune associated with Sonny Boy Williamson who recorded it for Victor as "Bring Me Another Half a Pint." "Yo Yo Blues" is a typical blues consisting of a number of different song elements and yet retaining a certain unity. This is the kind of general material usually found on commercial blues records. On the other hand "President Roosevelt" is

a topical song and is one of the best about the late president. Again you can feel the personal involvement which the artist has with this song and the times it reflects. Roosevelt Sykes is generally associated with the tune "Forty Four," usually a piano number, but it most likely predates even that artist. It was a well-known piece among the older Southern blues singers and many made recordings of it. Big Joe, however, gives us an unusually powerful and forceful interpretation of it on his guitar. "Mean Stepfather" is a deeply felt autobiographical selection in which parental neglect is strongly criticized. "Brother James," although not in ballad form, is one of the most moving stories in this collection due to its overpowering delivery. It's the type of song that might be found among white hillbilly singers. Rarely have I heard a blues of this quality. "Shake Your Boogie" and "She Left Me a Mule to Ride" are both rhythmic dance or "jump"

pieces exhibiting Big Joe's remarkable use of the slapping bass effect reminiscent of Barbecue Bob or Son House. Both are tunes associated with Sonny Boy Williamson who recorded the latter as "Sonny Boy's Jump" for Blue Bird.

Two more highly personal items are "Vitamin A Blues," a remarkable remake of Big Joe's early Blue Bird recording, and "So Glad," his "favorite" which again turns into an improvised personal reflection.

The late Mrs. Mary Williams was a remarkable singer in her own right and "I Want My Crown" found her in beautiful form, accompanied by her husband's powerful guitar. Reminding one of the late Blind Willie Johnson, this turned into a very moving and highly personal spiritual.

(Chris Strachwitz 1960 & 1990)

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El Cerrito, CA 94530



Big Joe Williams, his wife Mary and her son, in Los Gatos, Oct. 5, 1960, recording for Chris Strachwitz.

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Total time: 66:40

Joe Lee Williams – vocals and 9 string guitar, vocal by Mary Williams on #6.  
Charlie Musselwhite – harmonica.

Selections #1-12 recorded by Chris Strachwitz and Richard Garvin in Los Gatos, CA on October 5, 1960 except She Left Me a Mule to Ride was recorded by Bob Geddis in Oakland, Cal. in 1959. Selections #13-24 recorded by Chris Strachwitz on December 14, 1969 in Berkeley, CA. All songs composed by Joe Lee Williams and © by Tradition Music Co. (BMI) except (#11) which is published by Globe Music Co.

Cover by Beth Weil

Cover photo: Burton Wilson

Liner photos: Chris Strachwitz

Produced by Chris Strachwitz

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